

## PRESCHOOL TEACHER TRAINING IN BAHRAIN

J. Hadeed

University of London  
Institute of Education.

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L'éducation préscolaire a débuté dans les années 1950 au Bahrein et s'est développée solidement à la fois dans les secteurs privé et public. Cet article décrit un projet de recherche qui se propose d'examiner en détail deux initiatives de formation d'enseignants. Ces initiatives ont été créées afin d'améliorer la qualité de la formation offerte aux enseignants à la fois au stade initial et comme programme pour les enseignants déjà en fonction. Il décrit et évalue les deux différentes approches. Les secteurs public et privé sont soucieux d'améliorer la qualité de l'éducation préscolaire. Cet article démontre le niveau d'engagement et de soutien de la part des 2 secteurs pour mener à bien cet objectif.

La educación pre-escolar empezó en los años 1950 y se desarrolló sólidamente a la vez en los sectores privado y público. Este artículo describe un proyecto de investigación que se propone examinar con detalles dos iniciativas de formación de maestros, cuyo propósito fué el mejoramiento de la calidad de la formación de maestros tanto al nivel inicial como de docentes. Describiendo y evaluando dos distintas estrategias, el artículo demuestra el grado de entrega y apoyo de ambos sectores, público y privado, para alcanzar a mejorar la calidad de la educación pre-escolar

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### Background.

Preschool education is relatively new in Bahrain with its beginnings tracing back to the early 1950's. Since then the number of children attending preschool facilities has steadily grown from two kindergarten classrooms for boys to over 68 co-educational facilities (Al-Misnad, 1985). Only 22% of the total population of children under five years old are served by these facilities. Generally, they are known as 'kindergartens' and serve children from 3-6 years old (State of Bahrain, Central Statistics Organisation, 1993). Other types of child care include nurseries, playgroups, combined nursery and kindergartens and infant child-care centres. Unlike member Gulf countries, Bahrain does not sponsor a government preschool programme. The majority of preschools are privately owned/operated, and fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Private Education. Nursery and infant programmes serving children under three years old account for less than a third of the total registered child-care centres and are supervised by the Department of Labour

and Social Affairs (Jiya Lal Jain, 1986). Included in the nursery/infant category are four children's centres sponsored by the government's General Organisation for Youth and Sports, which are designed to serve a dual purpose: in the mornings they provide part-time day care sessions and in the afternoon they serve older children in the framework of a social centre that provides activities and games (B. Al-Jishi, 1989). There are also a few national and international organisations which support child care programmes (3) for children under five years old and they are, in part supported by some government funding e.g. Red Crescent Society, Women and Child Society.

For the majority, the different types of preschool provisions have been mainly classified according to the language of the syllabus used in the programme and ownership e.g. 'national' denoting an Arabic language syllabus and 'foreign' denoting all other languages i.e. French, English, Japanese, Korean, etc. (State of Bahrain, Central Statistical Organisation,

1993; Private Institution Directory, Ministry of Education, Private Education Directorate, 1990-1991). Although most officials are in agreement as to the aims and goals of preschool education, programme structure, syllabus and curriculum vary considerably between the different types of programmes within these broad classifications (J. Hadeed, 1993). Presently, there is no set syllabus for preschool education to follow and teachers have free reign to practice what they deem appropriate.

For some time, several researchers and professionals in the field have reported on the poor reputation of private preschool institutions throughout the Middle East (Al-Misnad, 1985; Mahmoud, 1987; Morsi, 1990) and the lack of training programmes for early childhood teachers (Nasir, 1984; Al-Misnad, 1985; Nashif, 1985; Morsi, 1990). A number of private institutions throughout Bahrain are housed in inadequate school buildings with an insufficient supply and variety of materials and apparatus for the number of children being served. Programmes tend to be highly structured in their approach and teachers play a dominant role both inside and outside the classroom (J. Hadeed, 1993). Particular emphasis is placed on reinforcing religious and moral behaviours, often requiring children to sit for long periods of time. Overall, children are not encouraged to initiate their own interests or express themselves independently (Hadeed, 1994; Morsi, 1990; Fadhel, 1986). Teachers are largely untrained, underpaid, and fare low on the social status ladder.

Part of the problem lies with the actual lack of manpower to monitor any type of quality control in the different types of preschool provision. The Ministry is critically understaffed in terms of qualified persons necessary to oversee and control the basic operating requirements (Amiri

Decree, No 14, 1985). The larger explanation for the problems are clearly rooted in the lack of training and experience available for early years teachers.

### **Training of Preschool Educators**

As the demand for child care services increased, so did the interest in training teachers for early years learning and education. In the absence of any comprehensive educational programme for training preschool teachers, early attempts supervised by the Ministry of Private Education in co-operation with United Nations organisations (UNESCO, UNICEF) focused on in-service training workshops and seminars which were brief and related to a specific area of programme development e.g. curriculum, play, adult/child interaction, language etc. While offering some support and new ideas for teachers, the lack of any formal assessments or evaluations would not establish whether or not these brief attempts had any sustaining effects on teacher's abilities and behaviours in the classroom.

Then in 1983 a select group of government officials and professionals from the University of Bahrain, the Ministry of Private Education and UNICEF met and formulated the basic foundations for a training programme for kindergarten teachers, entitled *An Integrated Curriculum For Qualifying and Training Kindergarten Teachers in Bahrain*. (Marwa, N., 1983). Specific tasks, educational requirements for prospective applicants, and appropriate role models for teachers were spelled out in the overall plan. There were ten 'coursework subjects' ;

- *Organising an Educational Environment,*
- *Care for Mental Health,*
- *Directing Child Growth and Development,*
- *Social Relations, etc.*

seven workshops and ten weeks of field

work involved in the 400 + hours (28 weeks) of teacher training. Unfortunately, the programme reached only 10% of the preschool teacher population and the overall success rate for the course was less than 50%. The poor results were largely owed to three factors:

*- the lack of follow-through from course work subjects to the practical applications in the classroom;*

*- the lack of teacher incentive due to additional strains and expenses for material costs placed upon teachers who already have very poor salaries (average range £116-£150 per month; Hadeed, 1990)*

*- the completed training gave little, if any, guarantees for increased salary provision, career promotion or regional (Middle East) recognition in terms of qualification. The certification for the completed course was only recognised in Bahrain.*

This particular low ebb of teacher morale would later be described in two studies: one skilfully conducted research on the expectations of preschool teachers and parents of children's development (Al Fadhel, 1986); and an ethnological survey on preschool provision in Bahrain (Hadeed, 1990).

New impetus to the growing concern for qualifying early years teachers would be supported by regional organisations and universities who set up workshops, lectures and symposiums emphasising the importance of early years education and the critical role which teachers play in the development of children's lives (The Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS); The International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET); Arab Gulf Fund, United Nations Development (AGFUND); The Arab Centre for Educational Research (ACER); Kuwait University; The University of Qatar; Bahrain University). Furthermore, clearer, descriptive guidelines and regulations for the establishment and licensing of private

educational institutions would be laid down in an Amiri Decree (No. 14/1985, State of Bahrain, Ministry of Education, 1985). This would ;

*- redefine preschool provision according to ownership ('national meaning owned by a Bahraini citizen; 'foreign' meaning established or financed by a foreign organisation);*

*- provide specific qualification for licensing procedures;*

*- lay down curriculum guidelines, including minimum qualifications for teaching staff in kindergartens.*

That 'minimum' requirement would specify that teachers would need to have at least a high school (secondary) diploma with 'some' training in preschool education. Recent research suggests that the implementation of these criteria for teachers has not been met (only 10% of the total preschool teacher population have received any training. Hadeed, 1993)

It would not be until the early 1990's that new efforts would be concentrated on a recognised programme for preschool teacher training. Currently underway are two programmes for early childhood teacher training - one under the auspices of the Ministry of Private Education and funded by AGFUND/UNICEF; and the other at the University of Bahrain (known as The Arabian Gulf University). Both programmes are unique and offer distinctly different training programmes and therefore will be discussed separately.

#### **Ministry of Private Education affiliated programme.**

This programme takes its roots from an early childcare programme initiated in Saudi Arabia in the early 1980's, under the directorship of Prince Talal Abdul Aziz. It was under his guidance that the AGFUND was established and the subsequent development of a model preschool and

teacher training centre was developed in Saudi Arabia (*The Riyadh Centre for Preschool Teacher Training*). Shortly thereafter, an adapted version of that model was constructed in Bahrain with the help and supervision of trainers from Saudi Arabia, appointed professionals from the AGFUND organisation (Najwah Mrouch-Mouhla), and government officials (Meriam Al-Doy; W. Al-Fadhel). The setting-up of the actual training programme consisted of three stages. For the first stage of training, a group of carefully screened candidates from Bahrain spent two months training at the child centre programme in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. From there, programme consultants from Saudi Arabia came to Bahrain to provide further training for teachers with children in the Bahrain training centre. Currently, the final stage is underway where the professional administrative staff have been 'phased out' and replaced by local staff trainers who, in turn, are working with the first wave of student trainees (8).

The programme provides a comprehensive, individualised approach to teacher training with considerable care and detail given to each individual trainee. Its primary aims are *to provide a model of quality preschool education and care for children in Bahrain* and secondly, *to train teachers to work in the field*.

The in-service operation rotates eight teachers at a time per training session over a six week period (the total number of preschool teacher working in the field is 400). Its approach is not based on one methodology or practice but seeks rather to utilise an eclectic approach to meet the needs of children within a specific Arab cultural context. Whereas in the majority of preschools in Bahrain, children are given limited choices within a well defined structural programme (mainly adult directed), in this programme children are encouraged to interact freely - a hands-on

approach. There are deliberate efforts made to balance activities initiated by the child and those initiated by the adult outside the regular outdoor play periods. A welcome aspect of the teacher training programme has been the importance placed on adult-child interaction, particularly the role of language and communication. One of the directors of the programme, Ms Al-Fadhel, has emphatically stressed the importance of making teachers aware of what it is they actually do and don't say to children and equally important "*when and how they talk to children*" (interview, Early Childhood Centre, Sitra, Bahrain. February 1994)

The purpose-built preschool facility has a prepared environment in that several stations are provided for the children to play or work at, either in pairs, alone or in small groups. These stations are frequently changed offering a range of topics drawn from individual interests or based on learning 'themes' such as colour, seasons, careers etc.. Several prepared materials are kept under adult supervision, available either on request (by the child) or when the teacher deems it appropriate. Parent involvement is an integral part of the programme and a considerable amount of effort and time is spent in educating the parents about the aims of the programme and aspects of child development.

In general, the key features of this action-based teacher training programme have focused on :

- *sensitizing and making teachers aware of the importance of all interactions with the child,*
- *creating an environment that is based on the needs of the child and development within an Arab culture (Bahraini),*
- *facilitating those needs with knowledge, skill and experience,*
- *involving parents as part of a team effort.*

In the light of previous attempts to train

preschool teachers, it would seem that this programme offers a long awaited spark of hope for the future improvement of early childhood education in Bahrain. Additionally, it provides some of the basic ingredients for a quality working-preschool-model for young children in an appropriate cultural preschool context. Its efforts are to be heralded as a serious attempt to recognise the importance owed to young children during the formative years of development.

Although it would be premature to assess the success of the programme at this stage (initial training is still in progress), there are encouraging indicators that this early years teacher-training programme is on the right track.

#### **University of Bahrain Project.**

The other training programme, currently in its third year, is based at the University of Bahrain and offers a degree programme in Early Childhood Education (Associate of Arts Degree) for candidates who complete the necessary requirements. The diploma for the programme is based on a credit system consisting of courses completed in:

- *general academic areas (math, Arabic, Islamic studies);*
- *a number of courses in the related fields of child development and preschool teaching;*
- *a specific number of hours spent in teaching practice.*

At present all candidates attending the programme are female, aged between 19-21, and 60% are married. (Hadeed, 1994). The candidates who entered the programme in 1992 are expected to complete the programme by the end of the summer term, 1994. Two successive waves of trainees completing the course training by 1995 and 1996, are due to follow.

Initial programme organiser and lecturer, Dr. J. Al-Umran, claims that there are shortcomings in the programme which

have been evident during the initial stages of development and implementation. One major concern seems to be the limited amount of time devoted to actual practice teaching in the classrooms. As it is, the main focus of the programme appears heavily weighted on academic course work, allowing for a limited number of hours to be spent on observation and student teaching. Dr. Al-Umran believes that the practice teaching periods not only need to be longer and more frequent, but also need to be improved in content. Optimum conditions regarding supervision, co-ordination, evaluative teaching and learning techniques for practice teaching fall painfully short of being fully utilized. The Dean of the Department of Education, Dr. Adiby, is keen to identify this weakness as an important area to remedy in the near future and, in some ways, claims it is expected to be part of any new teacher training programme.

To get some impression as to how the students felt about the programme, a brief questionnaire was administered to those candidates who were nearing the completion of the programme in 1994 (N=22; Hadeed 1994). The questionnaire consisted of 16 items. It was completed by 22 trainees. Due to the small sample and the nature of the questionnaire, the results should be viewed with discretion.

Contrary to the opinions of the organisers of the programme, the students felt there was not an over-emphasis on theory, yet one third of the candidates wanted more time devoted to practical experience. Many believed that there was not enough time allotted for meeting teachers out in the field (community) and visiting different types of preschool facilities (93%). This was exemplified by the fact that none of the trainees had attended any outside workshops, seminars or conferences related to the field during the course of the

programme (similar reported findings from a previous study (Hadeed 1993).

A good deal of students felt their instructors were not competent in presenting the material for the course (53%) and one fourth believed that the entire programme was poorly run. Despite some discontent, a resounding 73% of the trainees felt they would be very competent once employed as preschool teachers. How well these trainees will perform once in the field (provided that they all find jobs) is yet to be seen and some concern with regard to this is already being expressed among programme organisers. Suggestions for future changes in the existing programme are now under review and consideration.

In reviewing these two recent teacher-training programmes there are apparent differences in programme content, approach to training, duration of programmes and aims. Where the first programme sees training as an on-going-action- training programme based on in-servicing teachers already in the field, the other seeks to provide a more theoretical foundation, coupled with practical teaching experience, for new recruits. Both programmes are needed and welcomed. Some believe that both programmes would do best to serve each other, but unfortunately, there is little collaborative work between the ministry and the university at present. Plans are currently underway to bridge this gap, offering ideas which would compliment both programmes.

In all due respects, both teacher training programmes offer a long-awaited renewal of commitment and support to improving the conditions and quality of child care practice and experience in Bahrain. In addition, there are plans currently under consideration, which have called for further

investigation, assessment and evaluation of these programmes.

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